

## Disability Ministry in Singapore: Current State and Future Prospects

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### Introduction

*In recent years, accelerated by the work of organisations like Joni and Friends and the Lausanne Movement's Disability Concerns Network, disability ministry has experienced robust growth worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Singapore, a highly developed island state deeply connected with the global economy, has experienced similar growth in this area among its churches. In this short article, we provide an overview of the Church in Singapore. We then discuss the current state of disability ministry in Singapore, both at the local congregational level and the broader level of the Protestant Church in Singapore as a whole. We conclude by discussing the future prospects of ministry among persons with disabilities in Singapore.*

### Introduction to Singapore and the Church in Singapore

Singapore is a small city state in Southeast Asia, situated on an island at the southernmost tip of the Malay Peninsula. Gaining independence in 1965, it underwent a rapid process of industrialisation and modernisation, and has become a significant aviation, maritime, and financial centre. According to its 2020 Census of Population, Singapore had a resident population of 4.04 million people, complemented by a sizable non-resident population of 1.65 million.<sup>2</sup> It has a multi-ethnic population that is majority Chinese (75.9%), with Malays (15.0%) and Indians (7.5%) forming the largest minority groups<sup>3</sup>; English is the lingua franca. This ethnic diversity is paralleled by a plurality of religions comprising mainly Buddhism (31.1%), Christianity (18.9%), Islam (15.6%), Taoism (8.8%), and Hinduism (5.0%).<sup>4</sup>

While the history of Christianity in Singapore can be traced back to as early as the seventh century CE, it was in the nineteenth century that Protestant missions were undertaken on the island in a substantive fashion by Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and other denominations.<sup>5</sup> During this period the Malay Chapel was

1 See, for example, David C. Deuel and Nathan G. John, eds., *Disability in Mission: The Church's Hidden Treasure* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019).

2 Department of Statistics (Singapore), *Census of Population 2020 Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 2021), 3.

3 *Ibid.*, 7.

4 *Ibid.*, 32. These numbers only include those who are aged 15 and over.

5 Daniel S.H. Ahn, "Changing Profiles: The Historical Development of Christianity in Singapore," in *Religious Transformation in Modern Asia: A Transnational Movement*, David W. Kim, ed., Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions 148 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 253.



established in Prinsep Street in 1843. Renamed in 1955 as Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church, it is the oldest Presbyterian Church in Singapore.<sup>6</sup> Today, there are about 400,000 Protestants<sup>7</sup> worshipping in about 500 Protestant churches in Singapore.<sup>8</sup>

## Disability Ministry in Singapore

Disability is a relatively common phenomenon in Singapore. Some 3.4% of the resident population between the ages of 18 and 49 years of age has a disability, with the prevalence climbing substantially to 13.3% of the resident population who are 50 years old and above.<sup>9</sup> Singapore's population is aging,<sup>10</sup> which is a key driver of the national rise in the prevalence of disability.<sup>11</sup>

Historically, the Church in Singapore has ministered to persons with disabilities through the provision of social services. Agencies such as the Methodist Welfare Services, St. Andrew's Mission Hospital, Singapore Anglican Community Services, and TOUCH Community Services have made a profound impact on the national disability landscape. However, compared to social services, there has been relatively less emphasis on *congregationally based* disability ministry in the church, i.e., inclusion that takes place within Christian congregations. Thus, of the approximately 500 Protestant churches in Singapore, there are only about 25 churches (5% of the total) with one or more disability ministries that operate at least weekly. (The term "disability ministry" refers to any ministry that takes conscious steps to engage with or include persons with disabilities.<sup>12</sup>)

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6 Gaik-Bee Chia, "An Overview of the History of PSPC," in *Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church* (Singapore: Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church, 2013), 5.

7 Department of Statistics (Singapore), *Census 2020*, 199.

8 Singapore Centre for Global Missions, *An Antioch of Asia: The National Missions Study 2019 Report* (Singapore: Singapore Centre for Global Missions, 2019), 1.

9 Timothy Teoh, "The Social Landscape for Disability in Singapore," in *Enabling Hearts: A Primer for Disability-Inclusive Churches*, Wen Pin Leow, ed. (Singapore: Graceworks, 2021), 28.

10 The median age of the resident population rose from 37.4 years in 2010 to 41.5 years in 2020, and the resident old-age dependency ratio increased from 13.5 to 23.4 in the same time period (the dependency ratio is defined as the "residents aged 65 years and over per 100 residents aged 20–64 years). See Department of Statistics (Singapore), *Census 2020*, 3.

11 Ministry of Social and Family Development, "Enabling Masterplan 3," 2016, 16–17, <http://msf.gov.sg>.

12 Such ministries could be segregated (a Sunday school class solely for persons with autism) or integrated (a service which makes adaptations to welcome persons with autism alongside other neurotypical individuals).

Of these churches with disability ministries, what might be said about them?<sup>13</sup>

First of all, most of these ministries (76%) come from churches which are Anglican (5 churches; 20%), Methodist (6 churches; 24%), or Independent Pentecostal (8 churches; 32%). Some of this skew is certainly simply due to demographic realities, as these denominations are relatively more populous in Singapore. However, significantly less represented in proportion to their populations are the Presbyterians (one church), Bible-Presbyterians (one church), and non-Pentecostal Independent churches (two churches). Sizable denominations without disability ministries are the Evangelical Free Church of Singapore, the Lutheran Church in Singapore, and the Salvation Army Singapore.

In terms of ministry focus, about half of the churches have a segregated Sunday school-type ministry where children with disabilities are taught separately in a specialised classroom setting. Some of these ministries also include an adapted worship session where persons with disabilities worship together (apart from the main congregation) with the facilitation of persons without disabilities. Only three churches have inclusive Sunday schools where children of all abilities learn together. For those with sensory impairments, there are five churches with ministries for the deaf/hearing impaired, while there are two churches with ministries for the visually impaired.

Ministries that are less common include: support groups for parents of children with disabilities (two churches), dementia support (one church), and sports-based ministry to persons with disabilities (one church). Notably, to the authors' knowledge, there are presently no churches in Singapore that specifically aim<sup>14</sup> to provide respite care ministries to the families of persons with disabilities, suggesting a lack of focus on caregivers and the larger ecosystem surrounding persons with disabilities. Another concern is that many ministries are targeted at children and youths, with fewer ministries serving adults (especially those with intellectual and developmental disabilities). This results in a "drop-off" effect, where persons with disabilities tend to disappear from their local churches upon reaching adulthood.

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13 The figures in this paragraph were obtained through a thorough Internet search and through a three-year process of speaking to stakeholders in the sector to identify all disability ministries in Singapore. Nonetheless, there is the possibility that smaller or less well-known ministries might have been missed. All effort has been expended to ensure the figures provided are correct. This article's authors seek forgiveness if any church has been inadvertently left out.

14 Some ministries do provide respite care incidentally (i.e., by providing activities for persons with special needs, they allow respite for caregivers).



## Enabling Disability Ministry: The Koinonia Inclusion Network<sup>15</sup>

In 2019, in response to the growing need for disability ministries in Singapore, the Koinonia Inclusion Network (KIN) was formed to function as a sector enablement organisation. KIN's vision is to nurture "Enabled Christian Communities" by helping churches include and disciple persons with disabilities. As a literal para-church<sup>16</sup> organisation, KIN works *alongside* churches to help them establish and develop their ministries. Such work takes a number of forms. For example, in response to the frequent laments from disability ministry leaders that organising training for disability ministry volunteers was challenging due to the varied skill sets needed, KIN established the Certificate of Christian Disability Ministry (CCDM) in 2020. The CCDM, a six-day program, provides the fundamental training (including both disability theology and practical skills) required for lay members to engage in disability ministry effectively.

In addition to such regular training platforms, KIN also provides customised training and consultancy to churches to help them establish and/or develop disability ministries. For example, in 2021, KIN worked with a local Anglican church that had decided to start a disability ministry by providing customised workshops to help the disability ministry team identify its focus and core values, as well as to help the ministry team members clarify any theological concerns regarding disability. Thereafter, KIN helped the church to operationalise a congregation-wide survey to better understand the needs of the congregation vis-à-vis disability inclusion. This led to the official launch of the ministry in late 2021, and KIN has continued to provide training and support for this ministry into 2022.

In addition, to further support disability ministries, KIN established the Centre for Disability Ministry in Asia (CDMA), its research and publication arm to develop ministry resources that would be appropriately contextualised for an Asian context. Despite only being launched in 2021, the CDMA has already published two books (a one-stop handbook on disability ministry<sup>17</sup> and a Bible study on inclusion for

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15 The content in this section is adapted from Wen-Pin Leow and Ching-Hui Ong, "Towards an Asian Disability Missiology: Reflections from Singapore," *Journal of Asian Missions* 22, no. 1 and 2 (2021), 5-22.

16 Common glosses for the Greek word "para" include "beside" or "with."

17 Wen-Pin Leow, ed., *Enabling Hearts: A Primer for Disability-Inclusive Churches* (Singapore: Graceworks, 2021).

church small groups),<sup>18</sup> and a series of occasional papers. All these resources have been authored by Asian authors for Asian contexts, and have been well received by church leaders.

## Future Prospects

Given the brief survey above, what are some next steps that the Church in Singapore might take to further its efforts to promote disability ministry, and even more, to advocate for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in churches? There are three areas that stand out: First, as previously observed, disability ministries in Singapore mostly adopt similar ministry models (e.g., segregated Sunday schools). It would be helpful to explore other forms of ministry to reach out more broadly to persons with disabilities. For example, one church started Singapore's first sports-based Christian outreach ministry to persons with disabilities in 2021. The response to the ministry was overwhelming, including one participant who said, "As someone who has autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, and auditory processing disorder, I was very touched and encouraged by the way the session was carried out, from keeping in mind the struggles of the children to making changes to the program to fit their needs. It was heart-warming to see this happening, especially as someone who was misunderstood in my church and in school."<sup>19</sup> This ministry has attracted pre-believers with disability and their families, who subsequently joined the church because of the friendships forged over sports.

Second, one glaring lacuna is the lack of disability ministry for persons with dementia. As earlier mentioned, Singapore has an aging population which will be accompanied by a rise in dementia. In fact, in Singapore, one study estimates that one in ten people aged 60 and above has dementia.<sup>20</sup> This is a looming social issue that the Church in Singapore must address. However, to the authors' knowledge, only one Protestant church in Singapore currently has a ministry catering to persons with dementia. Like intellectual and developmental disabilities, dementia is complex and therefore challenging to address.<sup>21</sup> It is therefore imperative that the

<sup>18</sup> Wen-Pin Leow and Joanna Ong, *Enabling Communities: Bible Studies on Including People with Disabilities in Church* (Facilitator's Guide), Disability Ministry in Asia 2 (Singapore: Graceworks, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication with the participant.

<sup>20</sup> The Well-Being of Singapore Elderly (WISE) study was first conducted in 2013 by the Institute of Mental Health Singapore, and found a prevalence of 10% for dementia among adults aged 60 and above. A second WISE study is currently being conducted.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the discussion in Kenneth L. Carder, *Ministry with the Forgotten: Dementia through a Spiritual Lens* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019).



Church in Singapore engages with it swiftly and holistically.<sup>22</sup>

Third, another area of growth would be partnerships between different ministries. Disability ministry is a fertile launching pad for Christian unity and partnership. This article's authors observe that, in the course of their own advocacy work, churches from across various denominations often quickly agree on the needs to include and disciple persons with disabilities. While sector-wide programs like the Certificate of Christian Disability Ministry (CCDM) allow leaders and volunteers from different churches to interact with each other, more intentionality is needed to encourage churches to go beyond their local church or their denomination to partner with other like-minded churches to better serve persons with disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

While only five percent of churches in Singapore have a disability ministry of any kind, it is nonetheless a good beginning. Such ministries, often supported by passionate staff members, lay leaders, and volunteers, make a substantial difference in the life of persons with disabilities. In turn, by being part of their local congregations, persons with disabilities often help the rest of the congregation come to a better understanding of one's essential humanity as well as every person's need for the gospel of Jesus Christ. People with disabilities do not disable the church. They are essential members of the body of Christ. Ironically, it is when churches exclude that these key body parts are lost, and the body of Christ is disabled.

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<sup>22</sup> KIN has already begun working with a series of like-minded Christian partners to develop ministry solutions in this area.



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